
METAMORPHOSIS OF A MUSLIM

Autobiography of My Conversion

هدايتي إلى الإسلام

Lena Winfrey Seder

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ARABIC HONORIFIC SYMBOLS USED IN THIS BOOK

(ﷻ): *Subhânahu wa ta'âlâ* — 'The Exalted'

(ﷺ): *Ṣalla-Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* — 'Blessings and peace
be upon him'

(ﷺ): *'Alayhis-salâm* — 'Peace be upon him'

(ﷻ): *Raḍiya Allâhu 'anhu* — 'May Allah be pleased with him'

(ﷻ): *Raḍiya Allâhu 'anhâ* — 'May Allah be pleased with her'

ABOUT THE WORD 'LORD'

The word *lord* in English has several related meanings. The original meaning is 'master' or 'ruler', and in this sense it is often used to refer to human beings: 'the lord of the mansion' or 'Lord So-and-So' (in the United Kingdom, for example). The word *Lord* with a capital L is used in the lexicon of Islam to refer to the One and Only God — Allah. In Islam, there is no ambiguity about the meaning of this word. While it is true that one may occasionally use the word *lord* (whether capitalized or not) to refer to a human being, in Islamic discourse the reference of this term is always clear from the context. Whereas for Christians, Hindus and other polytheists, the word *Lord* with a capital 'L' may refer to Allah, to Jesus or to some imagined deity, for Muslims, there can be no plurality of meaning. Allah alone is the Lord, and the Lord is Allah — not Jesus, not Rama, not any other being.

The Editor

DEDICATION

To my loving husband and my beautiful,
precious sons and baby daughter.

To my kind, loving, caring, supportive parents,
who raised me to become who I am today.

Most of all, to Allah (God) for guiding me
and bringing me peace, security and happiness,
as well as for giving me so many blessings.

DESERT ROSE

(A POEM)

*I began my journey the day I was born.
My name told my destiny.
Yet, it remained hidden for me to discover.
I traveled a long time to get to this moment.
So many cactuses I stumbled over in the dark.
No star lighted my path — I was not yet awake.
Naivety guided me into sandstorms that made wounds in my soul.
Ignorance blinded me as the cactus' thorns scratched me.
However, these wounds propelled me forward and kept me on a
certain path.
One day when I looked ahead, I saw an oasis.
A mirage, I thought, so I slowly walked towards it — expecting to
be fooled again.
When I reached the mirage, I found a rose.
I touched it and found it was no dream.
Entranced by this rose, I placed it in the vase of my heart.
As it took root, it became a part of me.
My blindness lifted, for I could see the true Light.
Faith rested in my heart.
My Desert Rose led me to this destiny.
When I stray, its paper thorns remind me to come back to the
straight path.*

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Bismillah ir-Rahmân ir-Raheem

(In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful,
the Most Compassionate)

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

I would like the reader to understand that there is a difference between the real Islam — based upon the Qur'an and the sayings (*hadiths*) of Prophet Muhammad (*Ṣalla Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* — blessings and peace be upon him) — and a cultural Islam, which is a mixture of Islamic teachings and a person's culture.

The real Islam is beneficial to humankind, whereas some features of cultural Islam may actually contradict aspects of Islam. We pray that Allah (*Subhânahu wa Ta'âlâ* — Glorified and Exalted is He) guides Muslims back to the real Islam which upholds truth, justice, fairness, equality, rights, freedom and so much more.

When you look at Islam, you should examine the Qur'an — the essence of Islam — rather than taking things from any Muslim you may meet. Muslims are only human and may fall short in practicing Islam. You must go to the source to truly understand Islam and see its beauty.

Welcome and join me on a butterfly's flight through some pivotal points in my life.

MY LIFE'S JOURNEY

What could cause one to change his or her religion? What would drive an average, young white American woman to convert from Christianity to Islam? Out of curiosity, many people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have asked me how and why I converted. All were eager to hear my story.

As a human being, forgetting about all the people around me, I know the true reality is Allah (ﷻ) (which is the name of the Creator in Arabic and refers to One God without partners) and my relationship with Him.

﴿Say, 'He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.'﴾

(Qur'an 112: 1-4)

Before my conversion, I was filled with so many questions, like many other thinking people. I wanted to know: Who am I? What is my purpose? What should I do with my life? Why is it that some things in Christianity leave me with even more questions? Where can I find the answers?

My quest began at a very early age. Often, even young children begin asking those 'bizarre' little questions that put their parents on the spot — questions like: Why is the sky blue? What is death? Where did Grandma go to after she died? Where is heaven? How does God see us? These questions might drive parents crazy, but they demonstrate how humans are born with inquisitive natures and how they thirst for knowledge, clarity and truth, even as children.

As teenagers, the journey continues as adolescents want to know: What is my purpose? Why am I here? What career should I choose? Where do we go after death (because I am afraid to die)? During this time, they look for answers from their religion, from their parents, or from their society. If they cannot get satisfying answers, where do they turn? How does this affect the course of their lives?

I was not satisfied with the answers I got from the people around me, so my quest continued until I discovered the treasure of Islam. This discovery changed the course of my life.

As I start this book, I find it a little strange to be writing an autobiography at my young age. However, I have come to know that age is not measured by years but by experience. My life's experiences have made me wiser, but still I have a vast universe left to explore; even a whole lifetime can never teach us everything. I am still learning, just as a small child does, in this large, complicated world.

Nonetheless, even though my knowledge is limited, I want to share what I have discovered. The most valuable lesson I have learned in these past twenty years or so has been that of patience. Patience has been called a 'virtue', but it is more than that. It is a necessary skill that one must acquire to survive life and its hardships.

My life has been full of hardships, but these troubles have made me stronger. They have built my character and given me new vision. They have strengthened my faith, or rather my conviction, in Allah (ﷻ).

The religion of Islam emphasizes the need for patience; it could be considered a cornerstone of Islam. Allah (ﷻ) tells us that He rewards those who are patient.

«Say, 'O My servants who have believed, fear your Lord. For those who do good in this world is good, and the earth of Allah is spacious. Indeed, the **patient** will be given their reward without account [limit].'»
(*Qur'an* 39: 10)

«And be **patient**, for indeed, Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good.»
(*Qur'an* 11: 115)

«So be **patient** over what they say and exalt [Allah] with praise of your Lord before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and during periods of the night [exalt Him] and at the ends of the day, that you may be satisfied.»
(*Qur'an* 20: 130)

«So be **patient**, [O Muhammad]. Indeed, the promise of Allah is truth. And ask forgiveness for your sin and exalt [Allah] with praise of your Lord in the evening and the morning.»
(*Qur'an* 40: 55)

«And whoever is **patient** and forgives — indeed, that is of the matters [requiring] determination.»
(*Qur'an* 42: 43)

«So be **patient**, [O Muhammad], as were those of determination among the messengers and do not be impatient for them. It will be — on the Day they see that which they are promised — as though they had not remained [in the world] except an hour of a day. [This is] notification. And will [any] be destroyed except the defiantly disobedient people?»
(*Qur'an* 46: 35)

«So be **patient** with gracious patience.»
(*Qur'an* 70: 5)

«And be **patient** over what they say and avoid them with gracious avoidance.»
(*Qur'an* 73: 10)

«By time, indeed, mankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to **patience**.»
(*Qur'an* 103: 1-3)

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: «None is more patient than Allah against the harmful saying. He hears from the people that they ascribe a son to Him, yet He gives them health and (supplies them with) provision.» (Bukhari)

Patience is indeed a source of calmness for the one who is in despair. I have learned patience, praise be to Allah (ﷻ), but I still could learn more.

Unfortunately, I did not get to see my father before he died. This, and the fact that he never met my husband and my children, saddens me.

I do still have good relationships with many family members. One is my mother's sister, Aunt Clara, who is a wonderful and caring person. She always writes to me and never scolded me for my decision. Aunt Clara accepted my conversion in the beginning better than my mother did, although she is also a religious Christian. She has always been kind and loving towards me. I even have a couple of cousins who write me regularly, and we have a good relationship. My being a Muslim has not affected my relationships with them. They are indeed open-minded.

Going back to my childhood, I know that I was not the easiest child. As a baby, I walked at the age of seven months. I was very active and used to climb out of the playpen and the baby bed. Once I followed a neighbor up the street while my mother was busy carrying canned goods into the basement. When my mother turned around, I was gone, and she became hysterical. Our neighbor discovered me behind her after she had reached the top of the hill. She called my mother, before my mother called the police, and told her that she would bring me back to the house. I was a courageous little child, almost fearless. (Just like my sons, who are now paying me back for driving my mother crazy. I have two boys who are only a year and a couple of months apart, so I have 'double trouble').

As a child, I was full of questions. When Doug was young, my mother would ask him to do something, and he would immediately do it. I, on the other hand, used to ask, "Why?" If I received a satisfactory answer, then I would do it quickly. My parents were unnerved by this. "Do it because I said so!" was the reaction I often received. Although I was a little stubborn, I was still a well-behaved child, and when we were outside the home, I was very obedient. All that my mother needed to do was to give me that 'look', and I would

straighten up in a heartbeat. While other children ran around during church services, I sat quietly beside my mother and actually listened to the sermon, even at the age of three; if I got bored, I would doodle on some paper. I knew that if I went on a rampage like those other children, my mother would spank me. This taught me patience and endurance. Also, it was beneficial for me to actually hear the sermon. I learned to respectfully listen to others, which is something that some youth do not understand at all, not to mention some adults.

My mother was the pillar of my education. "The mother is a school" is a well-known saying in the Arab world, and this is so true. My mother is the one who unknowingly led me to Islam. She taught me moral lessons that have stayed with me. From the time I was in the cradle, she taught me about God and the Ten Commandments. I knew not to lie or to steal, and I was introduced to the concepts of heaven and hell and of good and evil. At an early age, I learned good manners and good behavior. I learned that bad behavior resulted in punishment, while people were pleased with good behavior, which usually was rewarded.

My mother used to read Bible stories to me. I had a very large picture book with stories from the Bible in it, and I used to enjoy reading them. I even had a pop-up figure book for the story of Noah's Ark, which I loved to play with. My mother and I also used to watch a lot of television together, especially classic films with actors like Charlton Heston, John Wayne, Cary Grant, Clark Gable and many others. She used to sit with me and explain what was wrong and what was right. I enjoyed watching action and police films with my parents, too, because my father loved action films.

Growing up, I saw a lot of violence on television. The debate continues over the effect of this on children, and many think that it is harmful, but I do not think that it is completely bad. I think I turned out all right. I do think it needs to be limited though. Television in general should be limited, in my opinion, because there are so many

MY CONVERSION

It was around the age of sixteen that I was trying to become closer to God. I wanted to serve Him, to obey Him and to have a personal relationship with Him. I read the Bible daily and prayed. I was basically a 'good girl'. Still, I felt unrest in my heart. I could not sleep well at times; I was troubled and confused. The preacher said to ask for things in the name of Jesus (✠), but all my life I had only prayed to and said 'God'. My concept as a child was of one God; I prayed to the Creator of the universe. When I was told to ask in the name of Jesus (✠), I tried it, but I felt even worse. I had been raised with the idea of a trinity; as a child I had accepted it, while still directing my prayers to the Creator. Now that I was older, I could not understand the trinity, and I started to ask questions like: How can three be one? How can God die on the cross? If He is God, then he cannot die. Who would take care of the universe in His absence? Why does God need children? If we pray to 'God the father' and 'God the son', then why not pray to the 'Holy Spirit' too — is it not part of the trinity? These questions angered my mother, who told me just to believe because it was the truth. I could not accept this. I wanted some evidence, some logical explanation, some answers.

During this time of great questioning, I began my studies at the local four-year Baptist College. I started out as a drama major, since I loved acting, then I was persuaded to change my major to music. I stayed with music (piano and voice) for a year, and then I switched to English Literature. I had enough credits to complete a minor in music. I still worked on plays, and I still took voice and piano while

continuing to perform in concerts. I was led to go into English for job security reasons, and I found that I liked it. I still wanted a chance in music and acting, though; I had not yet abandoned these dreams. I was writing poetry and short stories, but writing at that time was just a hobby.

I took some religion courses, not only because they were required but also because I hoped to have some questions answered. In fact, my questions actually increased after these courses. The professor admitted there were contradictions in the Bible but said, "We accept it as a whole to be the truth." I began questioning: "If there is a contradiction here and one there and so forth, then how do I know what is true and what is false?" I could not accept this. I wanted the truth — but where could I find it? I continued reading the Bible and searching.

I also continued studying and overloaded myself with courses (usually twenty-one credit hours per semester), so I completed my bachelor's degree in two and a half years. I wanted to finish early and begin working to earn my own money, because I was depending on scholarships and financial aid. Around this time, my father's health began to decline considerably, and then my mother's health began to decline as well. It was a stressful time for all of us, and I came to depend on myself at an early age. University was a time for discovering myself and what I really wanted out of life.

I had moved on campus by then. I went home weekly to see my parents, and I called every couple of days to check on them. Mom used to come and see the performances of my plays. Dad came once and enjoyed it very much. I remember well the play that he attended; it was one of my favorites. I portrayed an older woman who was the head of the Canadian Red Cross during World War II. My character was very hard on the other women and actually quite mean, so when my father saw my character, he really laughed. He was proud to see me on stage, although he never actually told me so. Both my parents

were proud to see me doing my activities, and this made me very happy. In those days, my father did not go out much due to the strokes that he had suffered. I felt so sorry for him as I watched him gradually get weaker. He suffered a lot of pain. I was so used to seeing him strong and very active in his work. I know it was very difficult for him and for my mother, who looked after him. My mother has also had her share of illnesses, but she has patiently endured. I think of her often and worry about her.

When we see the elderly and all that they suffer, we must be thankful for good health and realize that health is really a treasure. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) advised us: «Take benefit of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your sickness, your wealth before your poverty, your free time before your preoccupation, and your life before your death.» (a sound hadith recorded by al-Ḥâkim and al-Bayhaqi)

Later, as a new Muslim, at the age of nineteen, I was seeking support in my new religion. I wanted someone to teach me the Arabic language and to teach me more about Islam. I felt alone because my Christian friends did not understand why I had converted. At that time, I still had not told my parents that I was a Muslim. I knew a Muslim man at the university who seemed nice, so I decided to marry him. Admittedly, I rushed into the situation, as I really knew nothing about this man. Unfortunately, after some time together, we discovered that we were incompatible. After our son was born and we were unable to reconcile, we divorced. My son is always in my heart, although I have not been able to see him for a long time because he lives with his father in another country. I pray that Allah (ﷻ) will guide him and always take care of him. Indeed, the loss of my son was extremely difficult for me, and this was definitely an examination from Allah (ﷻ). I was patient, and I am still being patient, though it is not easy.